"Mino-Bimaadiziwin in Atwood's Speculative Fiction."

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Abstract

This project follows the path blazed by such scholars as Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma), Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene First Nation), Vine Deloria Jr. (Oglala Sioux), Lawrence Gross (White Earth Chippewa), Kwes Kwentin (Musqueam), Audra Simpson (Mohawk), Inés Talamantez (Mescalero Apache), and Zoe Todd (Red River Métis/Otipemisiwak), who have all argued for the value in using Indigenous epistemologies as critical theories in a largely non-Indigenous academic context. Following their research and their practice, my project uses the Anishinaabe epistemology of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, or “the good life,” to read Margaret Atwood’s speculative “ustopian” (dystopia / utopia) novel, MaddAddam. While scholars have approached the novel, as well as the trilogy as a whole, in terms of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-humanism, feminism, and trauma narratives, few (if any) have addressed the novel in terms of Indigenous ways of seeing and being part of an interconnected and interdependent world. Some readers may question the relevance of Indigenous studies in this novel due, perhaps, to the near-absence [...]
Thank you to the organizers for putting together what has been a really stimulating conference. I also want to acknowledge and thank the Anishinaabeg; it is truly an honor for me to present my work, which is indebted to Anishinaabeg scholars and elders, in Anishinaabe Aki. In truth, my research into the Anishinaabe philosophy of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, or “the way of a Good Life,” has radically altered how I read *MaddAddam*, the final novel of Margaret Atwood’s speculative trilogy (Rheault 104). The philosophy’s emphasis on living in harmony with one’s relations and environment has led me to realize, in ways that I was unable to understand through post-structuralist theory, that *MaddAddam* is entirely composed around the idea and necessity of interconnectivity, using it as a structuring device, a central thematic, and a means of plot resolution. Subsequently, *MaddAddam* offers a sustained critique of, and alternative to, ingrained Euro-American ontologies of rigid binaries, linear time, and human exceptionalism. To explain this, I’ll briefly discuss how the novel works – in terms of discontinuous narrative, time, and multi-voiced discourse – before analyzing a short scene which encapsulates the primary importance of interconnectivity to the novel’s structure and story.

Before I get started, however, I want to briefly talk about my skirt. It’s made by I Am Anishinaabe, a clothing company founded by Delina White and her daughters, of the Minnesota Chippeway. When I saw the skirt, I was struck by the artistry and its story: it’s beautiful and heavy, made with Pendleton blankets, mother of pearl, and bronze beads, all potent symbols for the Anishinaabeg of home, intuition, and spiritual protection. When I wear it, I appreciate the historic and cultural value that the skirt carries and I explain what I know of its significance and origins to anyone who asks. However, there is a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation, and I think it’s necessary and right that when I wear it, I’m always questioning whether it is appropriate or appropriating: non-Indigenous scholars working in Indigenous studies should always be aware of this fine line and should always be working to stay to the right side of it. Through its shell clinks and its Pendleton weightiness, the skirt reminds me, with every step, to step lightly and carefully as I work with a history, a philosophy, and sacred stories that are not my own.

These are the same concerns and theoretical issues that I encounter when reading Atwood’s novel in the context of Mino-Bimaadiziwin. Atwood may be a contentious choice for such a philosophical framework, partially due to her role in issues such as Indigenous erasure or cultural appropriation, as seen in works like *Surfacing, The Journals of Susannah Moodie*, and *Survival*. More recently, she gained notoriety for her part in discussions regarding the claims to Indigenous identity purported by Joseph Boyden and Stephen Galloway. Her support of these claims – support which she has no authority to give – is unusual, I think, since she discusses this...
very problem of “claiming kin” in her Oxford lecture series. There, she argues that “many white Canadians claim, as a matter of pride, some ‘Indian blood,’ perhaps to convince themselves that the land they live in is one they ‘ought’ to be living in” (1995, 45). Atwood admits that there seems little chance that non-Indigenous Canadians will stop making false claims regarding their desired Indigenous identities. However, she identifies a possible “benefit” from this trend by saying that “if white Canadians would adopt a more traditionally Native attitude towards the natural world, a less exploitative and more respectful attitude, they might be able to reverse the galloping environmental carnage of the late twentieth century” (72).

I find Atwood’s conclusion problematic for its repetition of the Native-as-Nature stereotype and its blasé acceptance of Indigenous identity theft. However, I agree with her more subtle point regarding the value of bringing Indigenous philosophies into more mainstream worldviews. Indigenous scholars like Jodi Byrd, Glen Coulthard, Vine Deloria Jr., Lawrence Gross, Kwes Kwentin, and Audra Simpson, among others, have made similar claims. Their shared argument is that the act of using Indigenous theories and philosophies alongside Euro-American philosophies – like post-colonialism, posthumanism, Marxism, and queer studies – will lead to the decolonization of these fields and the mutual strengthening of oppressed groups. It seems, then, that despite Atwood’s troubled relationship with Indigeneity, reading her novel in terms of Anishinaabe philosophies would have a variety of benefits. One of which would be that the respectful use of Mino-Bimaadiziwin alongside more “conventional” theoretical frameworks does the important work of decolonizing theory, as it rewrites colonial notions of who produces theory and about whom. As we know, representation matters. But it is no good to believe that non-Indigenous academics, such as myself, are acting as allies in decolonization efforts if we are distorting or misrepresenting the philosophy itself; thus, I invite your feedback at the end of my presentation to correct anything that I have said. In a more localized benefit, Mino-Bimaadiziwin can clarify Atwood’s vague statement about the need to adopt a more “traditionally Native attitude” by referring to actual Indigenous beliefs.

For example, Mino-Bimaadiziwin offers a comprehensive and practical way of seeing and being as part of an interconnected world. The philosophy is evident already from the Anishinaabe Creation Story. Paraphrasing Anishinaabe elder Basil Johnston, Gitchi Manitou, the Great Mystery, had a dream vision of all Creation and decided it had to fulfilled. In creating the sun, moon, stars, and Earth; the trees, flowers, grasses, and vegetables; the walking, flying, swimming, and crawling beings, Gitchi Manitou placed a piece of their self into each part of Creation (Heritage 12). Thus, Creation, as Anishinaabe scholar D’Arcy Rheault describes it, is the balance and interconnected harmony of all the parts, set to the temporal cycle of generation, growth, death, and regeneration (145). In contrast, Euro-American worldviews, shaped by Christian ideologies, are based on oppositional relationships of good and evil, life and death,

1 Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature.
2 Vine Deloria, Jr. makes much the same argument for white Americans in Custer Died for Your Sins.
3 Basil Johnston explains that “amidst change there was constancy” (Ojibway Heritage 12).
which are easily transformed into binaries of nature and culture, human and animal, civilized and savage, based on a linear time-frame aimed at “progress.” We know to what violent and exploitative ends that mindset leads. The difference lies, in part, with the Anishinaabe sacred stories which, as Chippeway scholar Lawrence Gross explains, encourage the Anishinaabeg at every stage of life to see themselves within a “peopled universe” – one where wisdom lies within the world around you (238). Connecting with the “other-than-human” beings, through fasting, meditations, dreams, and songs, allows the Anishinaabeg to learn the seven lessons of Mino-Bimaadiziwin – wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, moderation, and truth – and through these lessons, maintain the balance and rhythm of Creation. A significant portion of knowing one’s place within the Creation means that one respects the role and purpose that others have to play, whether they be an elder, child, moose, stone, tree, drum, or song. Thus, in the Mino-Bimaadiziwin worldview, you become a part of Creation by living in harmony with your relations, which include your immediate and extended family, your clan, your totem animal, your personal manitous, and the other-than-human beings present around you. This interconnected worldview clarifies Atwood’s statement about being less exploitative towards the natural world; but, more immediate to our interests, Mino-Bimaadiziwin provides a concrete, comprehensive, underrepresented, and unique approach to engage the issue of interconnectivity in MaddAddam.

Beginning with Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood, MaddAddam is the final instalment of Atwood’s speculative trilogy. All three novels tell the past and present-tense stories of the human survivors of a plague that was spread to eradicate humankind, in the hopes that the Earth would then have a chance to heal from the Anthropocene. The protagonists of these novels are all affected by psychological, sexual, or emotional traumas from before the plague; subsequently, they try to construct and maintain boundaries – such as physical separation, selfishness, and emotional distance – to prevent further harm. However, the discontinuous narrative structure of each novel demonstrates that this kind of self-isolation is untenable at best and damaging – to the individual, society, and the planet – at worst.

The novels all feature an alternating pattern of two narrators’ perspectives, told from oppositional spaces and times. These voices are often interrupted by external first-person stories, as marked by the vertical lines. For example, in MaddAddam, Toby, a former member of an eco-Christian cult, tells the present-tense story of the world after the pandemic, while Zeb, her lover, tells the past-tense story of his difficult life before the plague. Toby also tells stories of the past to the Crakers, a group of peaceful, human-animal genetic hybrids. In Crake and Flood, this alternating pattern is eventually disturbed, leading to a reunification of the split narrators in time and space. Yet, the first two novels end inconclusively on the question of how to behave in this new world, leaving open the question of whether the protagonists will continue to follow their isolationist mindset or chose one of relations and community. In contrast, in MaddAddam, a potent scene of inter-species vulnerability reveals that the community’s isolationist and anthropocentric beliefs are dangerous to their survival. The discontinuous narrative dramatizes this shift in worldview with the addition of a new voice. This new narrator, a Craker boy named Blackbeard, reframes the previously binary narrative pattern: from that of Zeb and Toby, past and
present, emotionally closed off and anthropocentric, to that of Toby, Zeb, and Blackbeard, a multi-voiced narrative of blended time frames, and representative of a non-anthropocentric community.

Mid-way into the novel, Toby receives a vision that requires her to move away from her denial of the past and her avoidance of emotional intimacy. While asking her deceased mentor for advice, she initially receives no linguistic response which prompts her to think “there is no magic, there are no angels. It was all child’s play” (222). The “it” which Toby thinks is fake refers to the religious teachings of the cult, who believed that the Christian God is omnipresent in the world. However, at the moment when she realizes God isn’t going to answer, Toby is brought face-to-face with a giant pig and her piglets, these are the same pigs who have repeatedly attempted to eat the human survivors. In her moment of vulnerability, Toby sees the sow as “Such enormous power. … She could run them down like a tank. Life, life, life, life, life. Full to bursting, this minute. Second. Millisecond. Millennium. Eon” (223). In this vision, Toby encounters a perception of the world as interconnected and cyclical, a realization that directly contradicts her own Euro-American worldviews of oppositional categories like human and animal, life and death, past and present. Toby’s reference to “power” seems to imply the animal’s strength, which could kill them. But this reference to possible death is juxtaposed by Toby’s unusual repetition of “life”: the five repetitions highlight the sow’s regenerative power – she is, after all, the mother to five piglets – as well as the sow’s choice to grant or take away the lives of the five humans, whom she could “run down like a tank.” The repetition is powerful precisely because it’s unclear to whom the repetition refers; the humans and the pigs are equally likely to be the implied objects of the phrase and are thus drawn together as mutual participants in Creation, that is, in “life.”

The connection between the pigs and the humans then expands across time. Whereas Toby previously warned Zeb of delving too much into his traumatic past, here she sees “life” – shared between the human and the pigs – expanding from this moment of tension to the micro- and macro- perspectives of time, from the “millisecond” to the “eon.” That is to say, this shared and embodied “life” is a synecdoche, a representative part of the overall balance and rhythm of Creation. Emotionally closed off from Creation, the pig’s gaze forces Toby to acknowledge her participation in it and with it. Toby’s vision is representative of what Anishinaabe elder Edward Benton-Banai describes as humility, or “to know yourself as a sacred part of Creation” (64), one of the seven lessons of Mino-Bimaadiziwin. The vision she receives is far from the vision she sought; nevertheless, it radically reframes her understanding of how to exist in this new world.

The encounter has a significant effect on the narrative structure and the plot, in which we can see the implications of Toby’s awakening to a Mino-Bimaadiziwin worldview. Following the encounter, Toby initially refuses to tell a story to the Crakers and later, tells their story not to them, but to herself. These changes offer the first two disturbances to the narrative pattern –

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4 The five being Toby, Blackbeard, Zeb, Black Rhino, and Shackleton.
marked above with the “X” – and foreshadow Blackbeard’s introduction as a storyteller, which adds a **third**, and distinctly non-anthropocentric, voice to the narrative.

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At the same time that the narrative structure is shifted towards a multi-voiced discourse, the vision also causes several important changes to the plot, foreshadowing the novel’s peaceful resolution with a multi-species community. The vision prompts Toby to stop eating pig meat, a rare source of protein, because, as Toby claims, of “what the sow communicated to her … though she couldn’t put it into words. It was more like a current. A current of water, a current of electricity” (261-62). An Anishinaabeg understanding of Creation is of “unity in movement,” of always being in the process of creation; as Rupert Ross writes about Anishinaabe beliefs, “each person’s primary focus is not on a separate thing but on all the movements and *relationships between things*” (Rheault 104; Ross 103-4). By describing the pig’s communication through nature-based similes of movement and flow, Toby demonstrates a significant shift in her worldview, moving away from fixed states of being and towards a perspective of Creation as a state of flux, for example, between a pig, a woman, and the movement of elements. Following this scene of recognized interconnectivity, the previously antagonistic pigs offer a truce between the human survivors in order to join forces against two men who have been killing and eating members of the pig and human communities. This truce leads to a successful trial and execution and the continued peace and communality between the humans, the pigs, and the Crakers, thus resolving various conflicts left open in the previous novels. In short, interconnectivity in the story is intwined with interconnectivity in the form and pot.

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In closing, I want to return to Toby’s belief that she’s been “abandoned” by the Christian God, just before she has her vision with the sow. Atwood once stated that, in Canada, Christianity is an “imported” and “fake” religion because it’s not Indigenous to Canada (Gibson 30). In contrast, she argues that “the only sort of good, authentic kind” of belief is one that “comes out of the **place** where you are” (*ibid*).

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In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. suggests that “the traditions, beliefs, and customs of the American Indian people are the guidelines for mankind’s future” specifically because they come from personal revelations related to a particular place. It seems to me that, despite the potential problems between Atwood and Indigeneity, she and Deloria are advocating for the same thing. Reading *MaddAddam* in terms of *Mino-Bimaadiziwin* highlights a practical means of living in respectful harmony and interconnectivity with one’s environment. Atwood’s non-Indigenous characters have ontological revelations in a particular space with the other-than-human beings around them. This causes them to redress their damaging and anthropocentric worldviews, to live with more “respect” for their world, and thereby hopefully avoid the mistakes made during the
pre-pandemic past. Outside the novel, for us, as Indigenous studies scholars, this act of reading MaddAddam through an Indigenous philosophy offers, I hope, a new way to read Atwood’s novel and, in the process, provides a small step in decolonizing mainstream academic and social ontologies.

Chi-Miigwech. Thank you for your attention.

Works Cited:


